What is the purpose of this Assessment?

The Assessment's purpose is to synthesize, evaluate, and report on what we presently know about the potential consequences of climate variability and change for the US in the 21st century. It has sought to identify key climatic vulnerabilities of particular regions and sectors, in the context of other changes in the nation's environment, resources, and economy. It has also sought to identify potential measures to adapt to climate variability and change. Finally, because present knowledge is limited, the Assessment has sought to identify the highest priority uncertainties about which we must know more to understand climate impacts, vulnerabilities, and our ability to adapt.

How did the process involve both stakeholders and scientists in this Assessment?

This first National Assessment involved both stakeholders and scientific experts. Stakeholders included, for example, public and private decision-makers, resource and environmental managers, and the general public. The stakeholders from different regions and sectors began the Assessment by articulating their concerns in a series of workshops about climate change impacts in the context of the other major issues they face. In the workshops and subsequent consultations, stakeholders identified priority regional and sector concerns, mobilized specialized expertise, identified potential adaptation options, and provided useful information for decision-makers. The Assessment also involved many scientific experts using advanced methods, models, and results. Further, it has stimulated new scientific research in many areas and identified priority needs for further research.

What is the breadth of this Assessment?

Although global change embraces many interrelated issues, this first National Assessment has examined only climate change and variability, with a primary focus on specific regions and sectors. In some cases, regional and sector analyses intersect and complement each other. For example, the Forest sector and the Pacific Northwest have both provided insights into climate impacts on Northwest forests.

The regions cover the nation. Impacts outside the US are considered only briefly, with particular emphasis on potential linkages to the US. Sector teams examined Water , Agriculture , Human Health

,
Forests
, and
Coastal Areas and Marine Resources
. This first Assessment could not attempt to be comprehensive: the choice of these five sectors reflected an expectation that they were likely to be both important and particularly informative, and that relevant data and analytic tools were available -- not a conclusion that they are the only important domains of climate impact. Among the sectors considered, there was a continuum in the amount of information available to support the Assessment, with some being at far earlier stages of development. Future assessments should consider other potentially important issues, such as Energy, Transportation, Urban Areas, and Wildlife.

Each regional and sector team is publishing a separate report of its own analyses, some of which are still continuing. The Overview and Foundation reports consequently represent a snapshot of our understanding at the present time.

After identifying potential impacts of climate change, what kinds of societal responses does this report explore?

Responses to climate change can be of two broad types. One type involves adaptation measures to reduce the harms and risks, and maximize the benefits and opportunities, of climate change, whatever its cause. The other type involves mitigation measures to reduce human contributions to climate change. After identifying potential impacts, this Assessment sought to identify potential adaptation measures for each region and sector studied. While this was an important first step, it was not possible at this stage to evaluate the practicality, effectiveness, or costs of the potential adaptation measures. Both mitigation and adaptation measures are necessary elements of a coherent and integrated response to climate change. Mitigation measures were not included in this Assessment, but are being assessed in other bodies such as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
(IPCC).

Does the fact that this report excludes mitigation mean that nothing can be done to reduce climate change?

No. An integrated climate policy will combine mitigation and adaptation measures as appropriate. If future world emissions of greenhouse gases are lower than currently projected, for whatever reason, including intentional mitigation, then the rate of climate change, the associated impacts, and the cost and difficulty of adapting will all be reduced.

If emissions are higher than expected, then the rate of change, the impacts, and the difficulty of adapting will be increased. But no matter how aggressively emissions are reduced, the world will still experience at least a century of climate change. This will happen because the elevated concentrations of greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere will remain for many decades, and because the climate system responds to changes in human inputs only very slowly. Consequently, even if the world takes mitigation measures, we must still adapt to a changing climate. Similarly, even if we take adaptation measures, future emissions will have to be curbed to stabilize climate. Neither type of response can completely supplant the other.

How are computer models used in this Assessment?

State-of-the-science climate models have been used to generate climate change scenarios. Computer models of ecological systems, hydrological systems, and various socioeconomic systems have also been used in the Assessment, to study responses of these systems to the scenarios generated by climate models.

What additional tools, besides models, were used to evaluate potential climate change impacts?

In addition to models, the Assessment has used two other ways to think about potential future climate. First, the Assessment has used historical climate records to evaluate sensitivities of regions and sectors to climate variability and extremes that have occurred in the 20th century. Looking at real historical climate events, their impacts, and how people have adapted, gives valuable insights into potential future impacts that complement those provided by model projections. In addition, the Assessment has used sensitivity analyses, which ask how, and how much, the climate would have to change to bring major impacts on particular regions or sectors. For example, how much would temperature have to increase in the South before agricultural crops such as soybeans would be negatively affected? What would be the result for forest productivity of continued increases in temperature and leveling off of the CO2 fertilization effect?

Has this report been peer reviewed?

This Overview and the underlying Foundation document have been extensively reviewed. More than 300 scientific and technical experts have provided detailed comments on part or all of the report in two separate technical reviews. The report was reviewed at each stage for technical accuracy by the agencies of the US Global Change Research Program. The public also provided hundreds of helpful suggestions for clarification and modification during a 60-day public comment period. A panel of distinguished experts convened by the President's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology has

provided broad oversight, and monitored the authors response to all reviews.